

# Missoulian

SKIING

## Chief Joseph Pass offers expanded cross-country trails this season



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CHIEF JOSEPH PASS – With snow now on the ground, and more on the way, the smell of hot ski wax is in the air.

Cross-country skiers – particularly those who like to eat up long distances on their “skate” skis – will find improved and expanded opportunities this season at Chief Joseph Pass.

The Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club has led the way in obtaining permission to groom roads on U.S. Forest Service land, and equipping its grooming crews to do the job.

Twelve miles of new trails, mostly on Forest Service roads, will be groomed for multiple users this winter. The trails are just north of the Chief Joseph trails, and extend from there north to Gibbons Pass, and east to Hogan’s Cabin.

The grooming will provide a wide, packed surface appropriate for “skate” skiers, but also will accommodate classic skiers, according to Mike Hoyt, ski club president, who also points out that skiers may well encounter other users on snowshoes, snowmobiles or dog sleds.

The new trails also will accommodate those who like to ski with dogs, or classic skiers on wider skis that don’t fit the tracks at the existing Chief Joseph trails.

The Forest Service actually approved grooming on 16 miles of road, but the last four miles will require additional work before they can be groomed. Hoyt expects those roads will be added to the system a year from now.

Nate Gassmann served as the liaison between the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and the ski club, and he said the approval came about as a result of discussions between Hoyt and the Forest Service. Both parties saw this as an opportunity to expand the diversity of recreational opportunities in the area.

The new groomed trails will be accessible from the Chief Joseph system by continuing north on the Broadway or Continental Divide trails, or from the snowmobile parking area at the junction of U.S. Highway 93 and Montana Highway 43, at Lost Trail Pass.

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**In addition**, the club has purchased new grooming equipment that will better prepare the skiing surface on the existing trails this winter. Those trails will continue to be groomed with tracks for “classic” skiers.

The club has long maintained the trails using volunteer labor, covering only their direct expenses, but not their time. This year’s crew will include up to 12 volunteers.

Mel Holloway, lead groomer for the club, says the firmer, better-packed surface will be noticeable.

“I think many will see the difference. Before, I would sometimes step through the surface, I might glide and then drop three inches. It was annoying and disconcerting, and can be painful.”

The improvements might not be apparent the first time the groomers pack the trails, but Holloway says the benefits will appear in the long run.

The new groomer and tracksetter will leave “corduroy” on either side of the tracks, providing better control for skiers, and tracks will be set farther from the groomed edge, allowing for better snowplowing.

Holloway also acknowledged that his grooming crew “would be more circumspect” in where they set tracks this winter, especially in some of the steeper curves, to alleviate the problem of skiers crashing when they build up too much speed and are unable to step out of the tracks.

The Trapper Creek Job Corps Center has assisted with trail improvements as well, straightening out the bottom of the Gold Medal Trail so that it merges with the Timber Trail instead of dropping straight into it.

The new equipment was paid for by a grant the ski club won from the Montana Tourism Infrastructure Improvement Program, and grooming costs are covered by a Forest Service Recreational Trails Program grant.

The ski club produces a trail system map every year, and the new skate skiing trails are indicated on this season’s map, thanks to Jim Greenfield, the ski club’s map coordinator.

Those maps are available at the Chief Joseph trailhead, and at many locations in the Bitterroot Valley, including sporting goods stores, bike and ski shops, bookstores, hotels and more.

Grooming reports and more information can be found at the Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club’s website, [www.bitterrootskiclub.net](http://www.bitterrootskiclub.net).

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In addition to those opportunities, skiers once again will have the trails at Lake Como available to them. The nonprofit Como Trails Club Inc., in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, maintains more than 30 miles of ski trails for both skate and classic skiers, accessed from the south side of Lake Como, between Hamilton and Darby.

A trail map is available on its website, [www.comotrailsclub.weebly.com](http://www.comotrailsclub.weebly.com), and also is usually available at the trailhead. The club has its own grooming equipment, and usually grooms weekly, when snow conditions permit.

Grooming and snow conditions at Lake Como trails are reported on the website, [www.missoulanordic.org](http://www.missoulanordic.org), according to Annie Creighton of the Como Trails Club. The site lists conditions at a variety of western Montana cross-country ski areas, including Como, Chief Joseph, Pattee Canyon Recreation Area, Rattlesnake Recreation Area, Lolo Pass, Lubrecht Experimental Forest, Mount Haggin and others.

Finally, skiers once again also will have the Skalkaho/Rye multiuse/snowmobile trail complex at their disposal. These trails, groomed by the Bitterroot Ridgerunners snowmobile club, have been used for years by skiers, snowshoers and others, in addition to the snowmobile traffic they carry.

Creighton cited the recent history of cooperation between skiers and snowmobilers, and noted that many people are members of both ski and snowmobile clubs. Hoyt also praised the cooperation that has existed among members of the ski club and the Ridgerunners.

Gassmann noted that trails on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest would be signed for multiple use, and that they have plans to post warning signs near blind corners, reminding snowmobilers to watch for skiers.

All that remains is for another few inches of snow to fall, and for the ski wax to be scraped thin.

Russ Lawrence is a Bitterroot Valley freelance writer.